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ABSTRACT

Teachers who are concerned and committed are especially needed in urban education. Problems and strategies related to the employment and retention of Black teachers are the quality of teacher education majors and the programs, the widespread myth of Black inferiority, the lack of effective communication skills and a positive self-image, and the need to reform the classroom. Black teachers also need special skills once they are in the classroom. Teachers must know how to eradicate the myths concerning Black students, including: 1) alleged apathy of Black students and their parents, 2) the perception of Black students as uneducable and innately inferior, and 3) the tendency to think that those students who speak "Black English" are inferior. Black teachers should also have skills in behavioral sciences, individualized instruction, understanding cultural backgrounds, and student motivation. (CJ)

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GENERAL THEME:

THE PREPARATION AND SURVIVAL OF BLACK PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS

FOCUS OF PAPER:

PROBLEMS AND STRATEGIES RELATING TO EMPLOYMENT AND RETENTION OF BLACK TEACHERS, INCLUDING SOME ATTENTION TO SPECIAL SKILLS NEEDED BY BLACK TEACHERS IN ORDER FOR THEM TO WORK EFFECTIVELY AS ADVOCATES FOR BLACK CHILDREN

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If we permit ourselves to listen to the critics or "super critics" in reference to the current status of public education in America, they would lead us to believe that "there is no hope" for public education. In support of their criticism, they have labeled today's public schools as jungles, prisons and failure factories. They further conclude that today's classroom teachers bear little or no resemblance to yesterday's teachers by contending that they are non-committed. Nevertheless, when one realizes that today's public schools are merely a reflection of the larger society with all its problems, our public schools, in spite of the critics, are doing an incredible job against overwhelming odds. And my travels and observations in today's classrooms dictate to me that instead of "no hope," "there is nothing but hope" for public education in America.

If we accept the premise that there is nothing but hope for public education, who are the key change agents that are charged with the responsibility of assuring us that those children who attend the public schools will receive a quality education? They are the classroom teachers. "The key to success in any classroom in America--urban, suburban or private--depends largely upon the quality of the classroom teachers. Good teachers--

teachers who are concerned and committed (not gadgets, teaching machines, color televisions, computers or other technological boons)--are especially needed in urban education.¹

Why urban education? "Those unable to recognize that urban education has run the full cycle and now educates predominately the poor and the Black keep asking the question: What makes it different? They fail to realize that public education in most of our large urban areas comprises a student population primarily Black or poor, whether we blame the courts, busing, "white flight," or other causes.² And there are those classroom teachers who are unable to accept and cope with the changes in the public schools' population. In addition, they seem to believe that certain cultural groups are uneducable, thereby maintaining limited expectations instead of expanding expectations for them. As teachers exit from urban school systems and other public schools, the need is reinforced to identify problems and strategies relating to employment and retention of Black teachers--teachers who at least share a commonality of cultural backgrounds.

What are the problems and strategies related to the employment and retention of Black teachers?

- THE QUALITY OF THOSE WHO ENTER TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAMS - Far too often in the past, schools of education have accepted students who were rejected by other schools or undecided as to whether or not they wanted to pursue a teaching career. This may have stemmed from the widespread belief that anyone can become a teacher or the belief that a career in teaching is an "easy way out."

If we are to change this popular belief in reference to teacher education, efforts must be made to utilize a more effective screening device for entry into schools of education. In addition, schools of education should reinforce their recruitment efforts in search of promising Black students. Maybe too often in the past we have taken students and teacher training programs for granted.

- GETTING BEYOND THE MYTH - There is a prevailing myth that a vast majority of Black teachers are unqualified (inferiority syndrome).

And because of this myth, Black teachers are often denied employment. Too often where Black teachers have been employed, they have been employed based upon some quota or percentage of their cultural group. Often qualified Black teachers are unemployed and their white counterparts are employed based upon racial quotas. Personnel departments must start addressing and solving this problem by employing those who want to teach children instead of those who temporarily want to pickup a paycheck.

- KNOWLEDGE OF SUBJECT MATTER AND THE TEACHING SKILLS - Prospective Black teachers must be assured (self-concept) that they possess a knowledge of subject matter and required teaching skills.

Those prospective teachers who maintain personal doubts in reference to their ability to instruct and manage today's classroom will only encounter a brief career in the classroom. A lack of knowledge and teaching skills enhances a teacher's chances of classroom failure or "burn out" and an early exit from the classroom.

If teachers are adequately prepared for a teaching career, chances are they will encounter long tenure as classroom teachers. The responsibility for preparing effective teachers rests with schools of education. Schools of education, especially those that are predominately Black, have a challenge and responsibility of helping school districts through ongoing contacts and communication to understand their role and mission and the type of products (teachers) they are producing.

- EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION/ARTICULATION - Unless one is equipped to communicate during an interview, chances are he or she will not be hired. No group of people has a monopoly on effective communication/articulation and Black teachers can learn to communicate effectively. All of us can learn to communicate effectively. The strategy here is to identify and plan programs during teacher training that enhance the communication skills of Black teachers. The development of effective communication skills should become a priority in teacher training programs. Those who are articulate stand a far better chance of employment and retention than those who possess poor communication skills.

● SELF-CONCEPT - One's self-concept largely determines one's action.

If this premise is accepted, then a teacher's belief about himself or herself is a crucial factor in determining his or her effectiveness in the classroom. Research indicates that the teacher's attitude toward himself or herself and others is as important, if not more so, than his or her techniques, practices or materials.

As a strategy for preparing classroom teachers, emphasis must be placed upon helping teachers develop positive self-concepts in reference to knowledge of subject matter and teaching skills.

Before one is able to reach out to like, respect and help others, he or she must have a positive self-concept. And the lack of knowledge of subject matter is an unpardonable sin.

● REVOLUTIONIZING THE CLASSROOM - Far too many of today's classrooms are morbid and many of today's students suffer boredom and eventually dropout of school. In order for classroom teachers to become change agents, help must be provided through teacher training programs and continuous in-service training.

To just prepare classroom teachers who will simply modify classroom methods isn't good enough. Instead, teachers must revolutionize classroom methods. According to Carl R. Rogers, "It is no longer accurate to call them teachers. They are catalyzers, facilitators, giving freedom and life and the opportunity to learn to students."³ And today's students, especially Blacks, are in need of and in search of dynamic classroom teachers.

"Unlike many suburban or private schools where children achieve in spite of teachers, teaching in urban systems requires a different kind of commitment. The classroom teacher becomes far more relevant in urban classrooms than her counterpart in suburban or private schools."⁴

Harry L. Miller contends that "for a long time now, the American public schools have been able to coast and get away with poor teaching by depending on the motivated and reinforced middle class pupil and parent. In sharp contrast, the disadvantaged child is completely dependent upon instruction. . . ."⁵

In spite of classroom teachers or anyone else, the only justification for funding and continuation of public education is to educate children. And some of today's educators seem to believe that there are certain cultural groups who are uneducable. Kenneth C. Clark observed in Dark Ghetto that "children treated as uneducable invariably become uneducable."⁶ In addition, far too many classroom teachers tend to use non-school variables (family, home and community) as excuses to perpetuate their own limited expectations of children from the "other side of the tracks." Such excuses by classroom teachers tend to exonerate teachers of all blame and more often place the blame upon the children and their parents for the pupil's lack of success in our public schools.

Nevertheless, instead of criticizing those classroom teachers who hold negative beliefs about certain cultural groups, Black teachers must help those teachers understand that these children are "warm human beings" with potential to learn the same as any other group of children. In order to help classroom teachers in general understand Black children, Black teachers need special skills to work effectively as advocates for Black children. Black teachers should refrain from joining their colleagues in

the condemnation of Black children in the teacher's lounge. Since desegregation, Black teachers have been known to join in the criticism of Black children.

What are the [special skills needed by Black teachers in order for them to work effectively as advocates for Black children? As a beginning, Black teachers need to help their professional colleagues eradicate traditional myths and half-truths in reference to Black students. Such myths and half-truths cause far too many classroom teachers to have the following misconceptions:

- NO ONE CARES - Too often, it is believed that neither Black parents nor their students care about education. And since they don't care, teachers say repeatedly and appear to believe that it is not possible to educate them. To reinforce their thinking, teachers use "poor heredity," "poor home background," "cultural deprivation," "low I.Q." and the like.

The myth that Black parents and children don't care is unfounded and research is not available to support such an assumption.

After twenty plus years, all in public education, I am convinced

that Black parents and children do care and they too want an education. Where and when classroom teachers understand and believe that we all care, they tend to change their attitudes and their expectations and to reinforce classroom instruction. Black teachers can and should help destroy myths in reference to education for Black children.

- PERCEIVING OF STUDENTS AS UNABLE - Instead of perceiving of students with certain cultural backgrounds as unable, students should be perceived of as able. Recent research by Bloom and associates concludes that most students achieve similar levels in learning ability, learning rate, and desire for further learning when they are provided with favorable learning conditions.⁷ William Purkey further contends that "The direction that students follow is heavily influenced by the beliefs that teachers hold about them. . . . Teachers who believe that certain children cannot learn and benefit from instruction, will have little success in teaching them."⁸

The negative perception of students often held by some classroom teachers can be changed through communication and assistance from their colleagues. Such perceptions are often perpetuated because of a lack of knowledge, information and understanding of certain cultural groups. Those Black teachers with similar cultural backgrounds must become advocates for Black children, thereby helping other teachers understand Black children. I firmly believe that all children can learn, and this is the message we must take to "Garcia."

- INNATELY INFERIOR STUDENTS - Through extensive research, Jensen,⁹ Shockley¹⁰ and others have tried in vain to prove that Blacks are innately inferior. And thus far, their research has proved invalid and void of merit. Nevertheless, there are perhaps far too many classroom teachers who tend to still believe that this false accusation against Black students has merit. And by virtue of their beliefs, these teachers act and react to students accordingly.

We must help our colleagues understand that inferiority and superiority are non-monopolistic. Through effective communication, Black teachers can help their counterparts understand Black students, thereby enabling them to move beyond the inferiority syndrome in reference to their beliefs about Black students.

- "BLACK ENGLISH" - Too often, those Black students who speak "Black English" are prejudged as "slow," "dumb" or "inferior." And instead of classroom teachers using students' speech patterns as an instructional tool to teach them correct English, they are using these speech patterns against Black students. Because Black students often bring to school a dialect, there is no reason for them to be prejudged and labeled or assigned to classes for special education. These are some of the dangers that those who advocate Black English seem to overlook or ignore.

Because Black English is commonplace in the Black community, students bring the same to school with them. Through the help

of Black teachers, other cultural groups need help in understanding and using the Black dialect as an educational tool. This is a unique role that predominately Black schools of education and Black teachers can play in helping their colleagues understand and use "Black English" in a positive manner. In addition, Black teachers can play a role in destroying the myth that Black children and their parents are satisfied with their speech patterns and don't want to improve their communication. I have never met Black parents or Black students who did not want their children to learn to communicate effectively.

Yes, there are certain skills needed, especially by Black teachers, in order for them to work effectively as advocates for Black children.

They are:

- SKILLS IN BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES - The behavior patterns (attitude) of the teacher is a characteristic that quite often may be far more important than what the teacher thinks or knows. The behavior and the way the teacher relates and interacts with the child are the basis for the learning attitude of the child.

Black teachers can and should be prepared through teacher training programs to help other cultural groups form positive attitudes toward Black children.

1 SKILLS IN INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION - Through individualized instruction, teachers are able to meet children on their own terms and start their learning experiences where they are--not where they ought to be--then lead them to higher levels of achievement through a series of skills mastery and concept understanding. Such teachers refuse to make unwarranted or invalid assumptions about children because they happen to come from the other side of the "railroad tracks."

Although all students would benefit from reinforced individualized instruction, there exists a specific need for this type of instruction for Black students. To be able to focus upon and address the individual needs of Black students, classroom teachers need help in becoming skilled in individualized instruction. This is an important skill for Black teachers to possess and share with other classroom teachers. Many of today's teachers would like to

individualize their instructional programs based upon the relevant needs of their students. However, due to the lack of training, knowledge or help, they are unable to do so.

- **SKILLS IN UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS** - In order to understand and appreciate the worth of all children, the classroom teacher should understand the varying cultures of children assigned to his or her classroom. Once teachers are familiar with these variations, they refuse to believe that any culture is inferior and accept the fact that children are different, but not inferior. Black teachers can and should become skillful in helping their colleagues expand their expectations for all children, especially Blacks, even though they are culturally different.

- **SKILLS IN STUDENT MOTIVATION** - The classroom teacher should be able to motivate students and lead them to believe that they can learn. Due to many frustrations, students often need constant motivation. Teachers can and should use both the

cognitive and affective domain to prove to students that they are concerned about their education and their general welfare.

As we prepare for the decade of the 1980's and the critics or "super critics" continue their accusations that our public schools are dying, schools of education must reinforce their efforts in refuting such allegations. As the student populations of the public schools change to those who are poor or those who are Black, it is only fair that a larger percentage of Black teachers be employed to help those children who trek to school daily.

According to U.S. News & World Report, "Expulsion and suspension most often involve minority children--even when they makeup a smaller percentage of the enrollment. A nationwide study. . .found that three times as many Black students as whites were suspended."¹¹ In addition, it has been reported that in some urban areas the rate of absenteeism among Blacks and the poor has reached a high of fifty percent. Further research reflects that a vastly disproportionate number of Black students in our public schools are assigned to special education classes.

These are a few of the evidences that clearly indicate to me that certain cultural groups may be more misunderstood than understood. Because these children--children who need so much--are misunderstood, the need exists for employing and retaining more Black teachers. To identify the need for more Black teachers in the public schools is not intended as a criticism of their white counterparts. Nevertheless, it is intended as identifying a justifiable need. I further believe that predominately Black schools of education have a unique challenge and opportunity to plan programs designed to equip Black teachers with those kinds of skills needed to help their white colleagues change their attitudes in reference to Black students.

Instead of joining the critics in the teacher's lounge in criticism of Black students, Black teachers must be equipped with those skills that will enable them to work effectively as advocates for Black children. In the final analysis, the destiny of one cultural group is tied together with all other cultural groups, and if we permit one cultural group to be miseducated, chances are we will eventually do the same to others.

I have heard all of the traditional excuses and accusations of racism; nevertheless, I doubt seriously if such continued accusations will solve the problems for which we are gathered here. I, above all, know that the excuses, blame and so forth will not help those Black children who are often being miseducated. Instead of the traditional excuses and blame, the time has come for us to reinforce our efforts and find solutions to the problems confronting Black children in reference to education. This may even call for giving greater impetus to our demands on organizations known as public schools. It has been my experience that, traditionally, organizations will only do for a group whatever is demanded, and if groups demand nothing, they will get nothing.

Perhaps as a final challenge, there are two quotations that I would like to share and leave with you. I think the first quotation, "So little done, yet so much to do" by Cecil Rhodes, really challenges all of us including schools of education. The second quotation by the late Robert F. Kennedy says "Some men see things as they are and say, why? I dream of things that never were and say, why not."

Ladies and gentlemen, can we find solutions to the problems and identify strategies relating to employment and retention of Black teachers--including the identification of special skills needed by Black teachers in order for them to work effectively as advocates for Black children? Why not?

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